Convocation

McCormick Theological Seminary

October 1, 1992

John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL .

Talk about having the rug pulled out from one, homiletically! Every preacher has had interruptions: the day a stray dog walks in the front door and down the center aisle, the free and happy soul who decides to lift his arms and pray outloud during the sermon, or the woman - a few months ago, who, as I carried the baptized infant down into the nave and up the aisle, saying, "This child is now received into the Holy Catholic Church," said, full voice, "Catholic Church? I didn't know this was a Catholic Church!" and stomped out. Thinking about and preparing to preach at the opening convocation of McCormick Theological Seminary and then two weeks before, the President and the Dean/Vice-President announcing his retirement - is one of those homiletical rug pulls.

Or - opportunities perhaps. It is the end of an era, an extraordinarily important and creative time in the long and distinguished history of this institution. These Ramage years, will be, I think, a defining moment for McCormick and I have been pleased to be part of them and I have valued and will continue to value Dave's and Betty's friendship and comradeship in ministry.

But I'm here to tell you that this is not a time for grief and regret. I'm here to remind you that every time is some kind of transition, between this and that.

I think it was a New Yorker cartoon. Adam and Eve are on their way out of the garden. The Guardian Angel, flaming sword in hand, is pointing the way out through the gates of paradise - into an ominous looking wilderness. Eve is turning pensively to Adam and saying, "Let's look at it as a transition period, dear." And we all know that outside Eden is when the real story starts, that human history does not happen in paradise but on a journey, in transit, on the way.

I came to Hyde Park in the fall of 1959 to be part of a wonderful experiment in Ecumenical Theological Education. It was called the F.T.F. and it brought together the Divinity School, CTS, Meadville, and Disciple Divinity House, in one collaborative enterprise, and about sixty days after I unpacked the FTF exploded, or imploded and was no more.

And so I have concluded that transitions are very creative times, pregnant times, times when all of us involved in the dynamic process of living the present in light of an unknown future, which is to say, living life in the real world - pay attention and live with intentionality.

Part of what I wish to affirm therefore is that the ongoing process of theological education will, I know, be extraordinarily creative for the whole community. I think it will give students an edge. Students need to know that teaching faculty will be more than ordinarily attentive. Faculty need to know that students will come with a little more of the vulnerability which allows education to happen. Students and faculty need to know that the board with its management types will do its very best to assure that the transition is deliberate and deliberative, thoughtful and creative.

And so, because I had the rug pulled, I have added that brief homily to my remarks. This is going to be a good time. And its going to be fun.

My second homiletical excursion is to say to students that something is going to happen to you in the process of theological education that you may not be expecting and may not know about until a few decades from now. It is called Formation - spiritual formation, faith formation, personal formation, what James Fowler calls formation of your affections.

The Dean of that other Presbyterian Seminary in Louisville, Steve Hancock, did some research recently and concluded that important spiritual formation happens in the midst of theological education, whether it is intended or not, and that it happens largely outside the classroom. The thing about formation is that, like physical growth, it is not apparent to the one to whom it is happening. But you will, we know, be shaped - your spirit will be formed - by what happens to you during the process of theological education.

When the Presbyterian General Assembly authorized the founding of seminaries in 1810, the resolution contained the following:

> "Filling the church with a learned and able ministry without a corresponding portion of real piety would be a curse to the world, and an offense to God and the people, so the General Assembly think it their duty to state that, in establishing a seminary for training UP ministers...it will be their endeavor to make it...a nursery of vital piety, as well as of sound theological learning, and to train up persons who will be lovers as well as defenders of the truth as it is in Jesus."

Lovers as well as defenders - it could happen!

In his novel, Roger's Version, John Updike describes what he thinks happens at a University Divinity School.

> "Believing souls are trucked in like muddy, fragrant cabbages from the rural hinterland and in three years of fine distinction and exegetical quibbling we have chopped them into coleslaw saleable at any suburban supermarket. We take in saints and send out ministers, workers in the vineyard of inevitable anxiety and discontent."

Of course it's not that simple. I wouldn't describe people who enroll in seminary as "believing souls" so much as "seeking souls" - souls in transit, on a journey, and for many of us the process was exactly reverse. We came in looking and left believing. We got formed, became lovers. But he does have the bottom line right. Theological education is the context for spiritual formation. And theological education becomes effective preparation for ministry insofar as it knows that, nurtures it, witnesses to it, enables it and celebrates it.

My personal bias is that it happens in community, and the fundamental community - whether we love it or despise it, is the church. And so the second homily concludes with an affirmation and invitation. The church - the autonomous collection of faith communities - has an enormous stake in what happens to you here and wants and needs to be a part of the enterprise. The invitation is to come - to be part - to not isolate and retreat from the institutional and therefore the most vulnerably human expression of our faith - the local church.

I wouldn't have been caught dead while I was a student in a church like the one I now serve. And it was a mistake, in a sense, an elitist, arrogant mistake. I wasn't sure the church had much to do with the Gospel. Now I know - it's all we have - for better or worse it's the body of Jesus in the world. Some students do come by that way. It's one of the privileges and challenges of ministry in a city where theological education happens. It always reminds me of the nearly impossible task of relief pitching in major league baseball...one small mistake, one fast ball - too high, and the game is over. So, after worship I see them coming - Moody students, Bibles already open. McCormick students are a little less determined and visible. They more or less look like everyone else only slightly more rumpled. They don't have a Bible open and ready for battle. They ask questions like, "What do you think about the authorship problem and the Pastorals?" as someone did last Sunday. And I had to say I hadn't thought anything much about it for a few decades, but II Timothy sure sounds like Paul to me.

And that, finally brings me to what I really want to say and it really isn't about the life of the institution - important as that is: nor is it about the future of Theological Education - every journal, every T.F., every denomination, every Christian with a brain has something to say about that. Rather it is about the heart of this matter... it is about the cost of business - this costly venture - this enterprise of preparation for ministry. This enterprise of carving out a significant chunk of prime-time life to get exercised about things like who actually wrote Titus, and learning Hebrew. It is expensive. It costs a lot of money for one thing, and above and beneath it is the most costly venture of all, living faithfully and honestly as disciples or followers or lovers of Jesus Christ.

The cost factor comes up one time in the middle of Jesus' ministry. It was probably the high point in terms of numbers. My mental picture of a day in the life of Jesus and his disciples is of a small group of people, walking from village to village, dealing with small gatherings wherever they went.: teaching, healing, discussing. But, in the middle of the story he was attracting a lot of attention apparently. "Great multitudes accompanied him," Luke tells us. They were there when he taught. They straggled behind as he traveled. They were there at meal time and night time. They were following because of the freshness and winsomeness of his teaching, and perhaps because they found hope in his description of God's coming Kingdom, and perhaps they followed because they were poor and had nothing better to do, and perhaps - at least one New Testament scholar proposes - they followed because they sensed a disaster about to happen and they didn't want to miss the excitement.

And so there they were, for whatever reasons, following him around, hundreds of them, maybe even several thousands. Whenever there are a lot of numbers in this religion business we need to check and see if we're getting it right, and so one time he turned around and said to them with no warning, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple...whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

And then he told two small parables about a builder who had not accurately calculated the cost of the building and was not able to complete it. And a king who underestimates his opponent and has to settle for peace on his enemy's terms.

These are unusually harsh stories and the teaching about hating one's family and renouncing everything seem impossibly difficult. Do you suppose he meant it, that following him means denying what we generally regard as one of our better characteristics - love for family? Did he really expect them - us - to

hate our parents, our spouses, children, in order to be a Christian?

The simple fact is that he didn't hate his parents. His mother continued to be a part of the story, accompanying him to weddings, following him all the way to Jerusalem. She is there when he is arrested and as he dies on the cross, she is still there; and one of the last things he is able to say has to do with her care. So of course this one who taught the redemptive power of love - love of brother and sister, love for the poor, love for the enemy - did not mean that his followers must hate parents, children and spouses or anyone!

Then why did he put it that way? What did he mean? The linguistic scholars who know about these things help us to understand that the Aramaic language Jesus spoke was extraordinarily vivid, and that it is common in Semitic language to make a strong point by dramatic contrast or hyperbole. Of course, he did not mean that you have to hate your parents. But he did mean that following him was demanding and costly; that it can mean serious self-sacrifice and it does mean a serious reordering of priorities. What he meant to tell them, and us, was that there is a lot at stake here: the meaning and significance of our lives; that the nature of this enterprise is salvation, wholeness, self-realization, and not just a very peripheral pursuit of peace of mind, or, in the their terms, a pleasant two week sojourn in the countryside waiting for the disaster to happen. He used the strongest language possible because the issue is human life.

There is important truth here. There is truth here about the limits of human love. The psychologists know that if the total meaning and significance of your life is tied up in your children, for instance, or your spouse, or lover or parents - if you have no identity apart from them, if you live through them - you are in trouble. Anne Wilson Schaeff calls that co-dependency. Parental love that knows no limits becomes smothering, oppressive and deadly. Part of loving as an adult is to know the limits of love.

And there is truth here about life. Life begins, the currently popular adage proposes "when the last child goes off to college, the mortgage is paid and the dog dies." Life begins, the slick magazines promise, when you can afford Gucci, BMW, to ski St. Moritz and drink Dewars. Bbut what Jesus said is that life begins when you find something to live for other than yourself: that full human life is given when a great cause calls out of you total loyalty, faithfulness and commitment. It is the singular Christian proposal that in giving life to Jesus Christ, true life is discovered. It is there throughout the story... It is the Christian counter proposal to the absolute commitment to consumerism which is characteristic of our time. True life is a

gift you are given when you discover something important enough to give your life to it.

That is not fashionable talk these days in the culture which continues to be motivated at its deepest level by the terror that we might have to pay more taxes. And it's not particularly fashionable - even in the church - as we wring our hands about numerical decline and sign up for the slickest "church growth" seminar we can find.

The Wall Street Journal published a delightful article by a Kansas City advertising executive who, with tongue in cheek, has come up with a marketing plan for revitalizing America's major religious faiths.

> "My strategy is to consolidate the various name brands, even the strong flagship brands like Southern Baptist into one identifiable, Exxon-like entity. The target audience here is Mom, Dad, Butch and Sis - solid suburban Americans who want a little God in their life and somewhere to go before brunch. After test-marketing various possibilities, I have decided upon the name Middle American Christian Church, or McChurch, for ad purposes. I will not be sure of McChurch theology until focus groups are run, but I plan on following the promotional path blazed so successfully by Holiday Inn. In other words, this will be your 'no surprises' church. When Dad brings the family here, he can be sure that they will not be asked to speak in tongues, handle snakes, or give money to the Sandanistas."

Among the ad man's proposals are a new brand of Judaism for baby boomers and a "market segmentation" approach for Roman Catholicism. "RC Light for post-Vatican II liberals, RC Classic for traditionalists and RC Free for those more interested in liberation theology than Papal Bulls."

> "Protestantism," he says, "presents marketers with special problems: the individual churches will have to understand that there is just so much theological shelf space, that product differentiation is not viable for go-as-you-please Protestantism. Thus, the Middle American Christian Church or MacChurch." [see American Mainline Religion, Roof and McKinney, p. 229]

Now, no one is quite that bold about it, but there is among us the sense that if we were a little more market conscious, if we stopped asking people to give money or time or to think critically or to love and care.. to give their lives, that is and

started giving them what they want, we might be more successful. And there are plenty of success models to emulate.

Deeper still there is the old ambivalence within Presbyterianism about anything resembling a hard-sell approach to faith. Our commitments have been to a theology of grace, not discipline.

But how sad, if for intellectual and aesthetic reasons we miss the real issue.

Because at the heart of the matter is the issue of our lives: Will we live them fully? Will we experience them as completely as we can? At the heart of the matter is paradox that in giving our lives away we receive them; that in picking up a cross and following we are alive as we never were before.

Sometimes history and circumstance draw the issue very clearly for us. If you visit Dachau, the point will be made eloquently. One of the remaining barracks is the "Priesterbunker," the barracks for ministers and priests and nuns who saw in Nazism an absolute conflict with devotion to Jesus Christ, who acted on that perception and who ended up in a concentration camp. And there is not a cleryperson - or a layperson for that matter, who does not look at that barracks and wonder, "Could I have done that? Would I have done that?" I stood a month ago in Wester Kirk Amsterdam admiring the gorgeous adjacent and architecture, Ann Frank's history place. And I understand again. There are times and circumstances when the issue is clearly drawn. That was one of them. And so Dietrich Bonhoeffer, knowing what was ahead, could write about cheap grace and costly grace and those familiar and stirring but also distressing lines:

> "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

The cost is not always dramatic. Lamar Williamson writes:

> "The woman who devotes her life to raising children in need of a home, the man whose faithful devotion to a mentally ill wife is quiet and steady, the youth whose civil disobedience for conscience's sake leads to prison or exile, and I would add - the pastor who labors in a church of 120 members years in and year out without much of this world's rewards - these are among the countless thousands who through the centuries and in many contexts, have interpreted the text with their lives." [Interpretation, Mark, p. 156-7].

One who paid with everything she had was Eva Jane Price, Congregational missionary wife, in China in the 1890s. Her long correspondence with her parents in Des Moines has been published

under the title China Journal. It is a fascinating, informative and moving story. She was 33, her husband 41, when they decided to go to Oberlin College with their two children to prepare for Missionary work. She was very human and winsome: wife, mother of three - two of whom died in childhood. She loved God, but she also loved her own life, children and her mother, and the farm in Iowa. It took three months to travel to China so a letter to her mother took six months to be answered. The letters are full of the stuff of humanity - the daily details of life in an utterly alien culture - which she did not understand and never understood her and which called her "foreign devil." And, of course, the isolation which the missionary spouses experienced - confined to compounds - which caused one of her friends to go mad and another to decide to commit suicide. In an early letter she writes, "Mother, what do you think I wanted the other day? Well, I'll tell you if you'll promise never, never to tell - one of your big aprons so I could put my head in it and cry and imagine it was in your lap." [p. 29]

In 1900, eleven years after they left Iowa and Oberlin College, the Prices and their remaining daughter were murdered in the Boxer Rebellion. In her last letter, as the rebellion closes in on the small missionary compound she wrote:

> "Our lives are worth nothing unless the Lord keeps them. We are all expecting to die and God is giving us grace, and we pray that you at home may be abundantly blessed by him. We would not choose to die now and in any horrible way, but pray without ceasing that God will choose for us and make us glad to go the way he says." [p. 236]

Time and circumstance do not draw the issue as sharply for everyone. Pray God that we do not have to face the issue as dramatically as Eva Price did, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer did.

But pray God that our good fortune does not protect us also from the opportunity to decide to live. Pray God that we are not so anesthetized by comfort and security and the orderliness of our lives that we never get around to living them by giving them away.

It is one costly venture. It means deciding to be his man/his woman with everything you are and everything you have. It means living for him. It means deciding to be his man/his woman every day. It means deciding to be alive.

I invite you to it.